



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INAUGURAL SPEECH



Hon Linda Savage MLC

(Member for East Metropolitan)

**APPROPRIATION (CONSOLIDATED ACCOUNT) RECURRENT 2007–08 AND
2008–09 (SUPPLEMENTARY) BILL 2009**

Second Reading

Legislative Council

Tuesday, 30 March 2010

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HON LINDA SAVAGE (East Metropolitan) [7.33 pm]: Thank you, Mr President. I rise to make my inaugural speech. Mr President, as you know, Hon Jock Ferguson died on 13 February this year. As members can imagine, I have been dismayed that it was these circumstances that led to me taking my place in the Legislative Council. I know that Jock was a close friend to many members. His unexpected death was met with much sadness. He is remembered for his lifelong commitment to working people and their rights, his tangible love for his family and friends, the genuine friendship he offered to all and his wicked sense of humour. It is because of his encouragement and support that I sought preselection, and now have the privilege of being a member of the Legislative Council for the East Metropolitan Region.

I would like to begin tonight by acknowledging the Nyoongah people, the traditional owners of the land, and pay my respect to their elders. Over time I have come to appreciate the real significance of these words and the link that they form between Australia's Indigenous people and all of us who have followed to make Australia what it is today.

In preparing for my speech tonight, I have read the speeches of many members, past and present. Most interesting to me was how members' social and political views were formed. It has long been accepted that we all bring our values and assumptions to any situation in which we find ourselves, and there is overwhelming evidence about how formative childhood experience is. I know that the influences of my childhood were pivotal in forming the views I hold today, so that is where I would like to begin.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Like a significant number of Australians, my parents grew up worlds apart. My father grew up in Belfast in Northern Ireland, a place he never returned to after he left in his mid-20s and which he always associated with grey skies, World War II and the death of a beloved older brother, and the class system. His strong Irish accent, which he never lost, marked him in a society so defined by class, but he considered himself one of the lucky ones. He got a chance to have a decent education through opportunities offered by the state, and then became the first member of his family to reach the stepping stone of university, and eventually a new life in Australia. At the same time, my mother was growing up in the country town of Waroona. Despite her parents' poor circumstances, her mother was determined that she would get an education. The local school did not offer what we now call Year 12, and her own father's expectation was that she would leave school at 15 years of age and get a job. However, my grandmother had not named her Roberta after Roberta Jull, the first woman doctor to set up practice in Perth, for nothing. So my mother was sent to the convent at New

Norcia, where she was taught by kindly nuns who had little more education than the girls, and she managed to get a bonded place to study at Claremont Teachers Training College. By sheer good fortune, at the end of her first year a number of students were chosen and sent to the University of Western Australia to do a degree. This was an opportunity that would never have otherwise been possible for my mother because of the cost of university education at the time. After my parents met in Geraldton, and even as their lives grew more prosperous, they never forgot that it was the opportunity for an education that had transformed their lives. As a result, education was always especially valued in my home, as was the contribution of teachers. The right of girls to be educated and treated equally was also a strong message, as was the belief that it was patently unjust that the accident of birth and circumstances could deny people that opportunity. The constant message from my female teachers at my all girls school was that we should aspire to anything boys could do, and this only served to reinforce my parents' views. So whilst individual effort and reward, hard work and taking responsibility for oneself were expected, it was always with the caveat that those of us who had opportunity, or could make our way, should never forget that many others did not have those opportunities or faced disadvantages, or obstacles through no fault of their own.

The 1970s, when I was in high school, were turbulent political times. I can still recall how unions on behalf of women fought for equal pay, and finally it was achieved in the landmark decisions of 1969 and 1972, despite enormous opposition. As I grew up, it was unions and the Australian Labor Party that were committed to and took the lead in fighting for the rights of women and minorities, led opposition to the war in Vietnam, were progressive in social policy and embodied the fundamental values I had absorbed in my home, particularly from my mother, whose intelligence and wisdom has been the most influential in my life. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that when I went to the University of Western Australia, I studied politics. This reinforced my belief in democracy as the most stable form of government and something never to be taken for granted, as well as cementing my lifelong interest in politics.

My employment and career choices have also reflected my interest in politics. Within days of finishing my degree I started work for Senator Ruth Coleman. Perhaps because I was 23 years old and had grown up being told women could aspire to anything, I did not fully appreciate what a trailblazer she was. Ruth Coleman was only the eighth woman ever to be elected to the Australian Senate, and only the second female senator from the Australian Labor Party. I think it is important to recognise how far we have come. Today the Western Australian Legislative Council has the highest ever proportion of women of any Australian Parliament, at approximately 44 per cent of members. I am very pleased to be part of this new milestone for women in politics.

I will always be grateful to Ruth Coleman for employing me as her research assistant and speechwriter. With kindness and humour, Ruth Coleman and Shirley Landquist, her long-time secretary, helped me make the transition into my first proper job. Because of my regular travel to Canberra, I gained an insight into politics and politicians that no amount of study could ever provide. Of course, then, like now, there was much criticism of politicians. But it was there that I saw politicians trying in good faith to address the pressing issues of the times. I realised, too, how easy it was to be on the sidelines criticising—how much harder it was to be part of finding the solution to complex issues.

In 1982 I went to England where I studied law at Cambridge University. Subsequently as a lawyer, I have worked in a number of positions, including at the Legal Aid Commission of Western Australia and for many years at the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, initially as a legal member and for some years as its Director, before being appointed to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. The appeals I dealt with were overwhelmingly in the area of social security and employment law, and so involved many of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society. These positions all heightened my awareness of the lack of access to legal services that many people faced, and, as a

result, I worked for a number of years with a group of dedicated women to establish the Women's Legal Service of Western Australia. My interest in the particular disadvantage women faced in accessing legal services, and in a legal and political system that had been developed entirely from a male perspective, led me also to become a member of the then Chief Justice David Malcolm's Taskforce on Gender Bias, and to be involved in organisations like Women Lawyers of Western Australia.

One of the most important issues I have been involved in followed my appointment to the Women's Advisory Council to the Premier. There I met Terri Ann White, and we subsequently co-wrote a book recording Western Australian women's experiences of abortion going as far back as the 1940s, as well as attempts that had been made in this Parliament to reform the law. This was the early 1990s, and the existing laws accorded neither with the widespread support for women's right to choose, nor the reality in practice. The subsequent reform of the laws in 1998 was something that I was very proud to support and be part of. I remember at the time many members of the public said they felt a renewed respect for the political process in this Parliament too, observing the heartfelt debate by politicians about such an important social issue. With that in mind, I believe that Hon Robin Chapple's bill on voluntary euthanasia, an issue that had enormous coverage in the media last year and much public comment, should get an opportunity to be debated during the term of this Parliament.

CHILDREN

Mr President, I would now like to talk about some of the issues we face in Western Australia today, including in the East Metropolitan Region, that concern the community. I referred earlier to the complexity of many issues. This complexity is clear when we consider our children. At one extreme we know there are children who face lives of neglect and dysfunction. Successive governments have grappled with how to protect these children and I have firsthand experience of the challenge, having worked in this area. But there is also a wider group of our children who concern us. The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, an institution of international standing, has for some years been trying to understand why a significant number of Australian children are doing so poorly. The evidence is clear in the high rates of suicide, the increasing incidence of mental health problems, poor school outcomes, aggression and obesity. Identifying exactly what it is about the environment we live in today that seems to be failing rather than fostering our children, and how to address it is one of the most pressing issues we face. Some things we do know. We know that the first three years of life are crucial, affecting even the development of a child's brain and having a lifelong impact. We do not need research to confirm that a safe and nurturing environment with an adult who is consistently caring provides the best chance for a child's development, just as we know that poverty and dysfunction will diminish a child's long-term wellbeing. But children and their needs have been low on the list of priorities. The previous Labor government recognised this and appointed Michelle Scott as Commissioner for Children and Young People, and she has been effective in consistently raising issues as they affect children. But many voices are saying that far more must be done.

Particularly concerning to me is the increasing incidence of mental illness that Dr Patrick McGorry, the Australian of the Year, says children and young people are experiencing. In that regard, the Barnett government is to be congratulated for the establishment of the Mental Health Commission, although, of course, the real challenge will be whether it can achieve the promise it made to give people who are suffering mental illness—including children and young people and their families—the support and dignity they need. Mr President, much is made of the social and economic costs of the ageing population, but it seems to me that we will face just as enormous economic and social costs if we fail to address the problems facing children and do not make them the priority they should be.

EDUCATION ASSISTANTS

As I have said, some issues are very complex; others it seems to me are not. Like other feminists, I am aware that the enormous gains made for women over the past 50 years have not translated equally for all women. As a wife and mother, I have had a long interest in the need to recognise and value the unpaid work overwhelmingly done by women caring for children and running households. The failure to do so has had far-reaching ramifications for women and children, and society in general. The failure to truly value what is regarded as the traditional work of women also affects those in the paid workforce and is at the heart of what is known as the gender pay gap. In November 2009 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations reported that the gender pay gap, rather than decreasing, has grown since 1992, and nowhere more than in Western Australia. Whilst this is unfair in any sector of the workforce, it is particularly unjust and punitive for the lowest paid. A current example is education assistants. These workers, predominantly women, are employed to assist teachers and supervise children with a range of special needs, and can earn little more than \$30 000 a year. The low base from which they are currently seeking a pay rise is a result of the undervaluing of their work, and that is because it is work typically done by women. It seems patently unfair that this work, recognised as crucial to providing children with a good education, is paid so very poorly. Their recent pay claim has been met with the same arguments used in 1972; that is, that the economy just cannot afford it. But this is not an excuse that fair-minded Western Australians would, I think, be comfortable with, given that the increase being offered is not even adequate to enable education assistants to maintain their extremely modest lifestyles. Because of this, I believe urgent attention must be given to amending the industrial relations framework so that the traditional undervaluation of work on the basis of gender is a factor taken into account when considering pay claims such as these.

CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION AMENDMENT BILL 2009

The final issue I would like to touch on are the stop-and-search powers proposed in the Criminal Investigation Amendment Bill 2009. Firstly, I would like to make the point that the empirical evidence shows that in Western Australia there has been a decline in the total number of offences reported to police over recent years, despite what seems to be the false perception that crime in general is increasing. And it is significant also that the decreases have been in many categories of the most serious offending, including homicide, armed robbery, burglary and motor vehicle theft. It has been argued, however, that there is a specific problem; that is, an increasing number of weapons on our streets and an increasing incidence of violence and antisocial behaviour. No-one, of course, would disagree with the proposition that knives, for example, can be used as weapons and should not be carried and used to assault others. But the measures proposed in the bill fail to address this with any precision and, instead, a completely disproportionate increase in stop-and-search powers has been proposed. As members of this place would know, stop-and-search powers were significantly widened by amendments made to the Criminal Investigation Act in 2006. What is currently proposed goes even further and would allow for extended periods in declared areas, mass searchings without the need for reasonable suspicion, and without the consent of the person. A person could be subject to a basic search that includes taking off outer garments, such as a coat, and being patted down. Failure to comply could lead to a charge of obstruction and the possibility of imprisonment or a fine. The weight of legal opinion expressed by the Law Society of Western Australia and some of our most prominent and respected legal minds, including recently retired members of the judiciary, is that existing laws are more than adequate and that what is proposed is a real threat to civil liberties. We have seen the unintended consequences of law and order legislation being introduced hurriedly. But that is not my greatest concern. My concern is that there is an unacceptable risk that the new stop-and-search powers could be exercised in an inconsistent and arbitrary way, and, of course, it will be almost impossible to prove that the power has been improperly exercised. Some people will say, "If people have nothing to hide, why would they

object?”, yet history abounds with examples of people with that attitude who have stood on the sidelines and allowed their civil liberties to be diminished, only realising their mistake when they, too, are subject to such sweeping and, in practical terms, incontestable powers of the state. It is alarming to me, as a new member of this Parliament, that, in the twenty-first century, a government in a democratic country is seriously considering removing from its citizens the fundamental protection that the requirement of reasonable suspicion provides.

Having said that, Mr President, I remain optimistic. In my lifetime I have seen enormous changes in attitudes, and I believe we are largely a fairer, more tolerant and more inclusive society than was the case in the past. Despite cynicism about politics and politicians, it is an honour for me to become a member of the Legislative Council.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

When in 2007 I decided to take the plunge and to stop talking about politics and try instead to be a part of it, I wrote to the then Premier, Alan Carpenter. I sincerely thank him for taking the time to speak to me about my aspirations and for his encouragement. I particularly acknowledge Dave Kelly, secretary of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union, whose candour and support was crucial. I also thank Fran Logan, the husband of one of my dearest friends, who played an essential role as mentor and friend. So that I do not inadvertently leave anyone out, I will not individually name the many people who encouraged and supported me on my way to becoming a member of Parliament, but I would like to record my gratitude to you all. I know that the electors of the East Metropolitan Region did not vote for me personally, but for a member of the Australian Labor Party. My hope is that in the remaining term of Parliament, I can do my best on their behalf to understand and represent their concerns.

To my many friends, most of whom are not as interested in politics as I am, but who have on many occasions listened to me express my views, at times forcefully, and sometimes without taking breath, thank you. Thank you also for the genuine interest and enthusiasm you have shown for this new chapter in my life.

My special love, of course, to my husband, Stephen, and my children, Esther, Spencer and Declan, who are here tonight.

Finally, because of the circumstances of my election to Parliament, I would like to finish by reflecting again on the qualities that people across the political spectrum spoke of when remembering Jock Ferguson. Those qualities were his passion for fairness and the courage he had to stand up for what he believed in. Those are the qualities I intend to aspire to as a member for the East Metropolitan Region.

[Applause.]
